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ABSTRACT

Just as all perceptions are of figures differentiated from a larger background, a play takes place against the background of the audience's knowledge and feelings. While audience members generally bring to a performance a large body of background information--they evaluate the storyline, for example, using a lifetime of personal experience--at times they need to have this background knowledge enriched in order to fully appreciate a work. Sometimes, for example, the world of the play is unfamiliar--either because the play was written for a society that no longer exists, as is the case in Sophocles's "Antigone," or because, as in many contemporary works, playwright and audience no longer share similar values or worldviews. Audience members can participate more fully in the world of the play, however, if they are given background material on the play's storyline. They can learn to evaluate the play as a play and to appreciate the constraints imposed on it by the script, performance space, available time, and the audience itself through additional education activities such as backstage tours, discussions of performance history, talks by artistic and technical staff, and postperformance discussions. Such activities not only enrich the immediate performance but also add to the background knowledge the playgoer can take to the next play. (MM)

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Background and Foreground:
Audience Education from Theory to Practice

(Presented at American Theatre Association convention, Minneapolis, August 9, 1983)

Tyrone Guthrie wrote:

> When an uninstructed person looks at a field he sees simply a mass of not very interesting or various material, mostly green. When a farmer looks at the same field he sees an infinity of shapes and colours and textures, all of which have associated meanings. The field to him becomes a book full of lively significance.[1]

What Guthrie's "uninstructed person" lacks is background. As Guthrie knew, we perceive things only in contrast to other things. That's what keeps a chameleon alive. That's why a soldier's camouflage makeup works. Or a magician's black thread

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against a black backdrop. Guthrie's "uninstructed person" fails to see most details of the field because he has nothing to contrast them with; those details he does notice--its greenness, for example--are precisely those for which he does have background: he knows the field is green because it is not red, or yellow, or blue. But for the most part, the field, to him, is undifferentiated, both within itself and in relation to other things.

Guthrie's farmer, on the other hand, has background, and he brings it to the act of seeing the field. The field has significance for him because he can contrast it with other fields, rich and poor, well- and ill-cultivated, and can contrast the parts of it with each other. As Figure 1 suggests, Guthrie's farmer has a richer experience of the field because he sees it against the background of his knowledge of the world of agriculture.

To describe this fact, and its related phenomena, psychologists use the terms figure and ground. All our perceptions, through whatever sense, are of "figures," perceived against the "ground" of something else.

In his pioneering book, Dynamics of Drama, Bernard Beckerman describes the theatre experience in these figure-ground terms. A play, says Beckerman, takes place against the background of the audience's knowledge and feelings.[2] Like the field in Guthrie's

example, the perception of a play depends on the background brought to it.

Providing, or enriching, that background is the job of audience education--of what I've called "playgrounding."[3]

Looking Through

Most of that necessary background, of course, has been there all along, for every audience member, and needs no particular enrichment. As Keir Elam points out in The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama (pp. 98 ff), all dramatic worlds, even the most avant garde, are based substantially on our own "real" world; that is, the world of the drama always greatly overlaps ours. People in plays generally talk and listen, suffer and rejoice, much as they do in our world; both the law of gravity and the laws of human conduct can generally be relied upon.

The audience member, as shown in Figure 2, can thus see what I call the story of the play against the background acquired through a lifetime and, like Guthrie's farmer, can find significance in it.

This ease of access to the dramatic world is aided by the nature of the performance medium: live actors in a physical space. Unlike the perception of written literature, the experience of theatre, at its most basic, need not be explicitly taught. As Martin Esslin writes, "drama compels the spectator to

decode what he sees on stage in exactly the same way as he has to make sense of, or interpret, any event he encounters in his personal life."[4]

And so, as shown in Figure 3, the audience member is able to apply everyday perceptual skills to look <u>through</u> the performance to the story beyond, a story taking place in a more or less familiar world.

But sometimes that world is <u>less</u> familiar rather than <u>more</u>. As Beckerman writes:

> When a playwright first constructs a play, the world of his action is usually the world of the audience--either the actual, physical world or, more likely and essentially, the social, psychological, and moral world. . . . But as a play ages and travels, its world of action encounters differing grounds of audience sensibility, which may no longer overlap the background of circumstance. When this happens there is danger that, unless the two worlds can be brought into correspondence with one another, the potential for rich theatrical response will be severely curtailed.[5]

Bringing these two worlds into better correspondence is one of the functions of audience education. Many "playgrounding" activities consist of providing playgoers with <u>background</u> for the story of the play. The actions of Sophocles' <u>Antigone</u>, for

example, can be more clearly and intensely seen against a background of the culture of ancient Greece and, specifically, a background of the myth of Oedipus. But this background world may not always be the explicit historical period of the play: Macbeth, for example, is probably more usefully seen against the background of early-17th-century England than against the background of 11th-century Scotland, and Anouilh's Antigone is set as much against the background of occupied Paris as against the background of war-torn Thebes.

This kind of "backgrounding" is certainly useful for plays from other times and other cultures. But it can be equally valuable for contemporary plays. As John Styan reminds us, great theatres of the past all developed within "unified communities" and thus "their writers enjoyed the favours of an essentially homogenous audience." Today, says Styan, "the theatre . . . rarely finds such conditions."[6]

A Twofold Vision

Making the performance transparent--seeing through it to the dramatic world beyond--has traditionally been considered the whole aim of theatre. Even today, one theorist writes:

> To say that a work of dramatic art must entertain is to say that is must command the attention of its audience. The dramatic illusion which has this power of commanding focus

> is broken when attention is drawn to the materials or techniques which have been used to create it.[7]

And again:

> When the artistic illusion is successful, it . . . directs the focus away from the actual materials which have gone into its making and keeps it upon the appearance which has been created."[8]

But such a view is a minority one and is misleading, if not wrong. For, as has been observed long and often, good audience members approach a performance in two ways. The first is the one we have been discussing: looking <u>through</u> the performance at the story beyond. But the second is just as important to a rich theatre experience: looking <u>at</u> the performance--making the performance not transparent but opaque.

We can find a parallel in the literary experience. Louise Rosenblatt, one of the leading practitioners of "reader-response" criticism, writes:

> In the transaction with the text--of, for example, <u>Othello</u>--the reader envisions the characters, participates in their uttered thoughts and emotions, and weaves the sequence of events into a plot. . . . Or the actual technique of the text--linguistic or dramatic--may capture the attention, and there may be awareness of, or even

> reflection on, the sources of the effects being sensed: the technical traits of the text, the fresh image, the subtle rhythm, the variations on conventions.[9]

Interestingly, Esslin also uses the example of Othello to make the same point, but this time not about the reading, but about the playgoing, experience. He writes:

> We who are more skilled in appreciating drama are, in fact, getting our pleasure at two levels at the same time: in watching Othello we are deeply moved by the misfortunes of the hero, but the very same moment when tears come into our eyes at his downfall, we, also, almost schizophrenically, say to ourselves: "How brilliantly Olivier held that pause! How beautifully he achieved that effect by a mere raising of an eyebrow."[10]

The first mode of perception, that of looking through the performance, comes naturally to children. One of my best moments as an actor was in one of my very first roles: as Dr. Einstein in a small-town high-school production of Arsenic and Old Lace. In the scene in which my partner and I manhandled a corpse through the window and into the window seat, I had to make sure one of its shoes fell off, to be discovered later by the hero. At the moment the shoe hit the floor, I could hear the whispers of the elementary-school children in the first row, all of whom knew

me--Ken Davis--very well. "Dr. Einstein," they were saying, "Dr. Einstein, the shoe, the shoe."

The other mode of perception, that of looking at the performance, comes only with experience or, lacking that, with training. The best audience member, I suggest, is as Esslin describes, one who views the performance in both ways. Edward Wright puts it even more neatly: "The ideal audience is half childlike, half adult."[11]

Looking At

To some extent, of course, the performance is always opaque. The centuries-old argument about theatrical "belief" has been generally resolved: most audience members, even when caught up in the story of the play, are always aware that it is a play. Only that awareness, after all, keeps them in their seats, keeps them from entering into the action themselves. And as both the Russian formalists and Brecht have maintained, perhaps the whole purpose of theatre is--or should be--making the medium of our everyday perception opaque instead of transparent, consciously known instead of unconsciously accepted, "strange" instead of automatic.

The playwright, director, actor, and designer can do much to achieve this opaqueness, this awareness of the performance medium. One term for such techniques is aktualisace, often

translated as "foregrounding. Elam, describing foregrounding in language, writes that it "occurs when an unexpected usage suddenly forces the listener or reader to take note of the utterance itself rather than continue his automatic concern with its 'content.'"[12]

Yet again, this foregrounding can only take place against a background supplied by the reader--or in our case, the playgoer. And the necessary background to any theatrical performance is the world of theatre; Figure 4 diagrams this relationship.

The novice playgoer has little of this background, and so little of the performance stands out against it. This fact is revealed by the questions novice playgoers ask: "Why do they talk in poetry?" or "How do they learn all those lines?" But gradually, with experience, the background becomes richer and so, therefore, does the foreground--the theatre experience.

Audience education can help provide this background. Such playgrounding activities as backstage tours, discussions of performance history, and talks by artistic and technical staff members all have this function, of enriching the background that playgoers bring to the performance.

To a great extent, such activities involve learning, and appreciating, the constraints imposed on theatre--by the script, by the performance space, by the available time, by economics, by the audience itself. Understanding these constraints, whether

imposed by the art form itself or by the conditions of the particular production, lets the playgoer see the performance as the solution to a wide variety of problems, all of which serve as its background.

Incidentally, once the performance is finished, audience education can provide its own kind of "foregrounding," too. Post-performance discussions and other kinds of follow-up activities can serve to highlight features of the performance and story of which any given playgoer may have been only partially aware. Such foregrounding not only enriches--at least in memory--the immediate performance but also adds to the background the playgoer can take to the next one.

Putting It Together

Audience education, then, can enrich theatrical perception in two ways, as shown in Figure 5--by providing the playgoer with a richer background both for the performance and for the story it presents. The psychologist Harold Lee wrote, in 1938, of both kinds of enrichment:

> One's appreciation of Greek statuary is increased if he knows something about the history and conditions of Greek civilization to help him see what is actually before him. The knowledge may increase the perceptual grasp of the object . . . . If this is true concerning the sculpture of

> the Greeks, how much more is it true concerning their tragic drama! The conventions of the Greek stage and the conditions of the presentation of the play must be known. Besides these matters of technique, one must know something of the whole depth of Greek thought and the breadth of Greek life that is represented.[13]

The critic John Mason Brown, writing about the same time, defined good playgoers as those "who are active, not passive; whose eyes and ears are open, not shut; who are anxious not only about the thing done but also about the manner of its doing; who can be susceptible to subject matter at the same time they are alert to treatment."[14] Audience education, by providing backgrounding and foregrounding, can help produce such playgoers--men and women who can see a play as Guthrie's farmer sees a field, not simply as "a mass of not very interesting or various material" but as "full of lively significance."

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1. Tyrone Guthrie, A New Theatre (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), p. 172.

2. Bernard Beckerman, Dynamics of Drama: Theory and Method of Analysis (New York: Drama Book Specialists, 1979), pp. 137 ff.

3. Ken Davis, "'Playgrounding,' Part One: Theatres Discover New Horizons in Audience Education," Theatre News, 15, No. 2 (1983), 1, 16, and "'Playgrounding,' Part Two: A New Model for Audience Education," Theatre News, 15, No. 3 (1983), 12-13.

4. Martin Esslin, An Anatomy of Drama (London: Abacus, 1978),

pp. 23-24.

5. Beckerman, p. 139.

6. John L. Styan, Drama, Stage, and Audience (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1975), p. 122.

7. Theodore Shank, The Art of Dramatic Art (Belmont, Calif.: Dickenson Publishing Co., 1969), p. 179.

8. Shank, p. 189.

9. Louise M. Rosenblatt, The Reader, the Text, the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1978), pp. 68-69.

10. Esslin, p. 91.

11. Edward A. Wright, Understanding Today's Theatre, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1972), p. 31.

12. Keir Elam, The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama (London and New York: Methuen, 1980), p. 17.

13. Harold Newton Lee, Perception and Aesthetic Value (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1938), pp. 134-35.

14. John Mason Brown, The Art of Playgoing (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1936), p. 23.

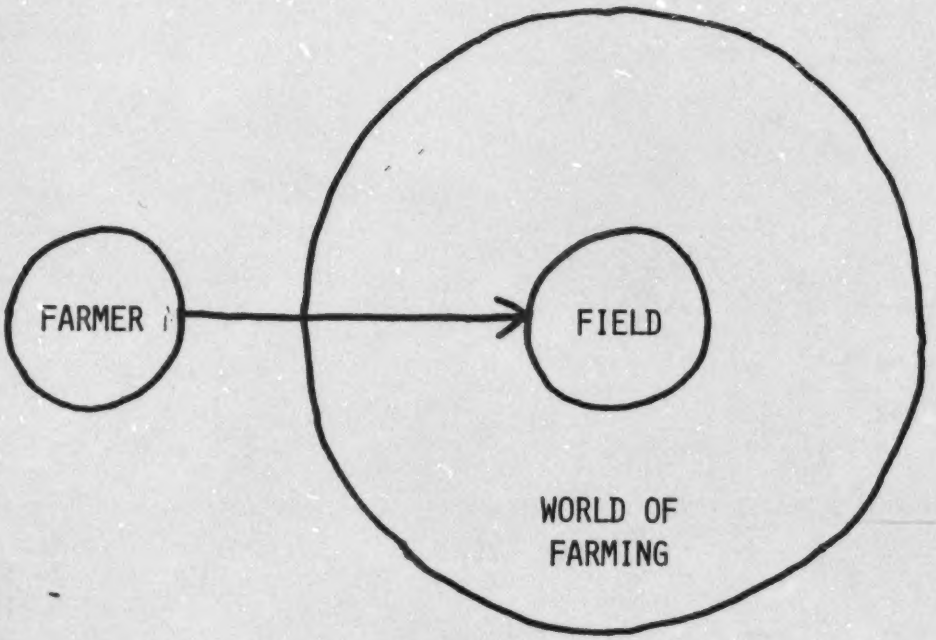

Figure 1

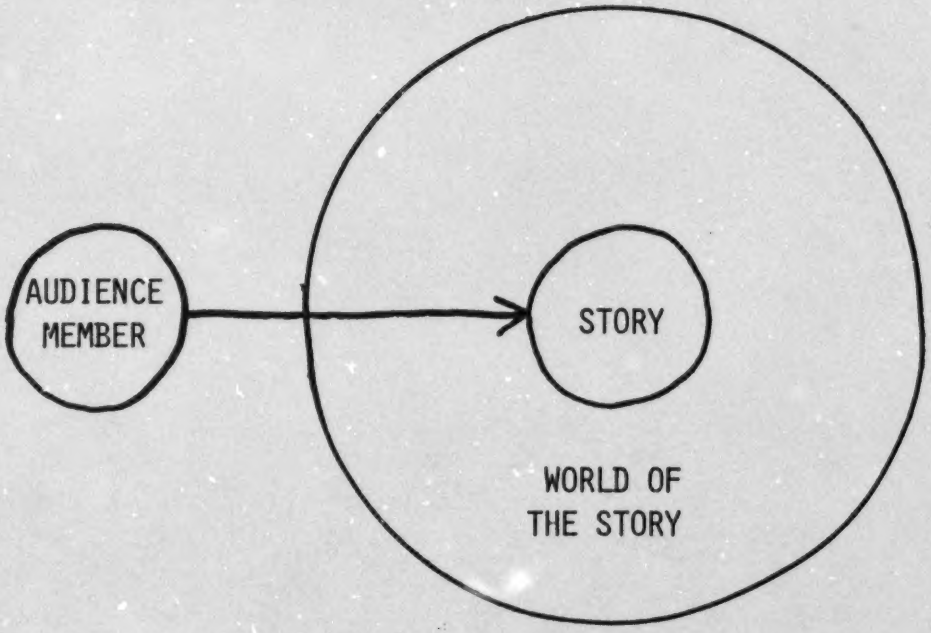

Figure 2

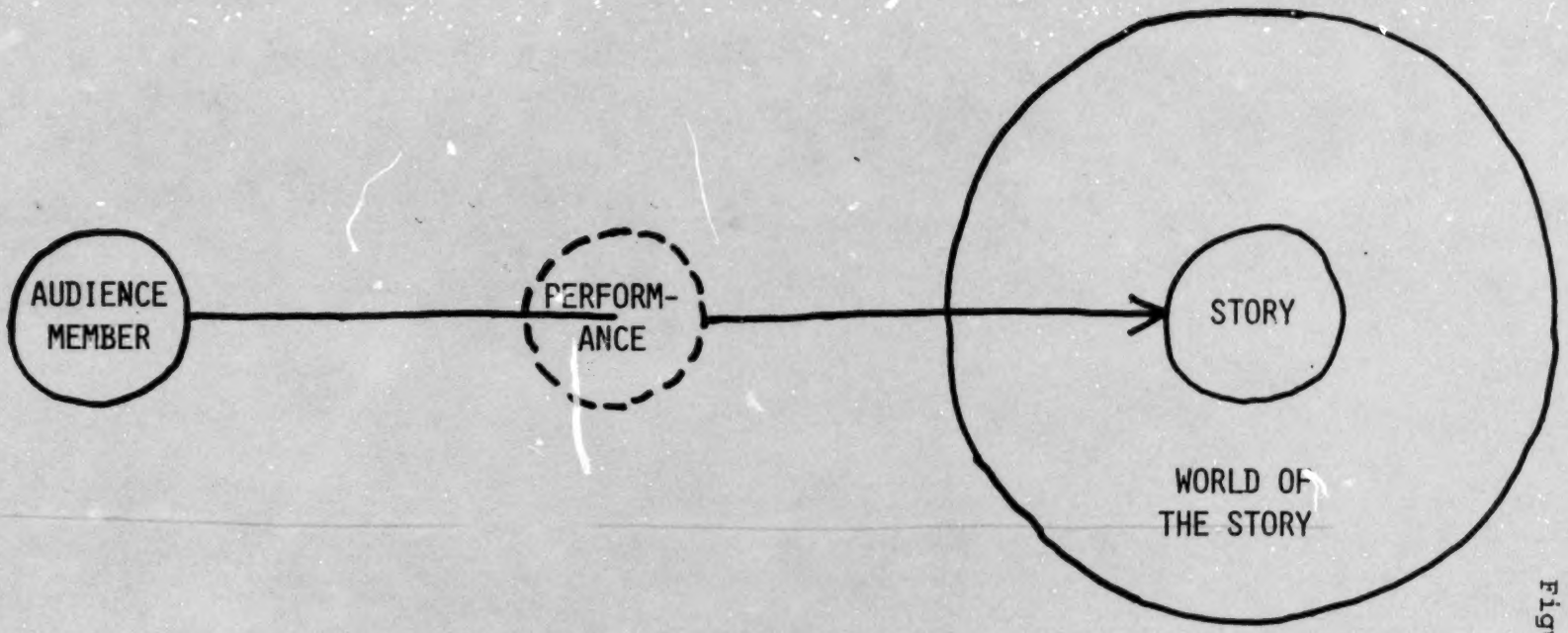

Figure 3

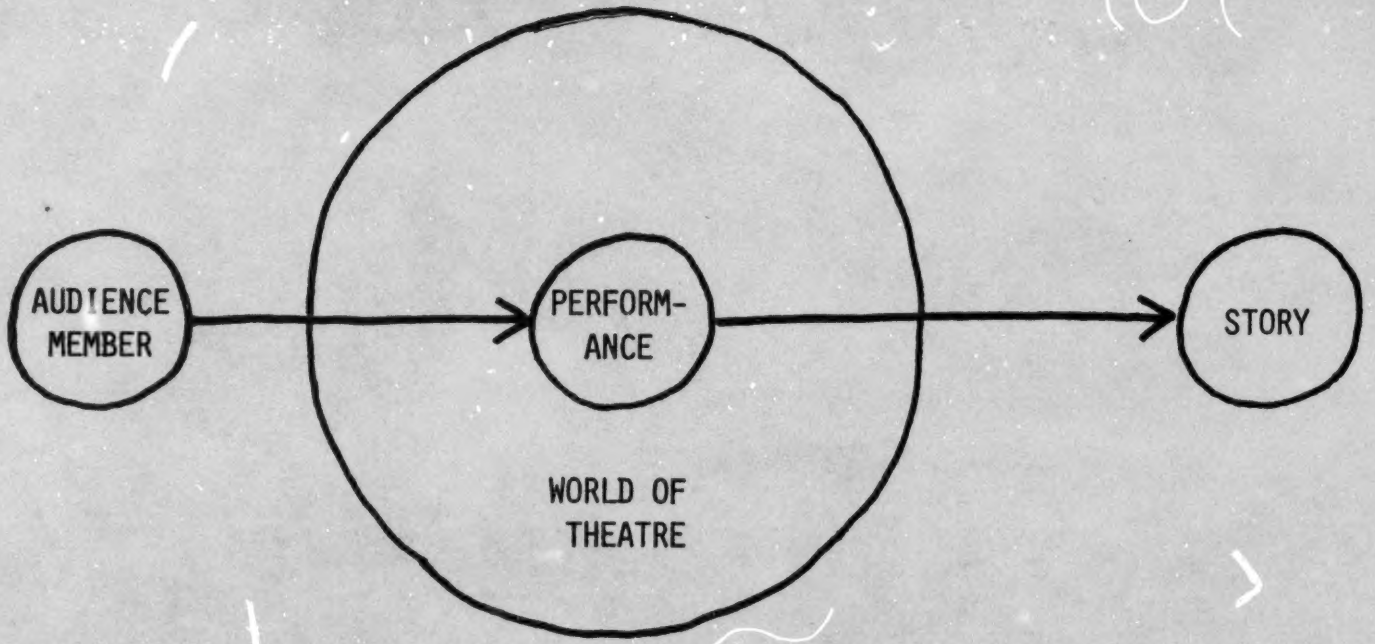

Figure 4

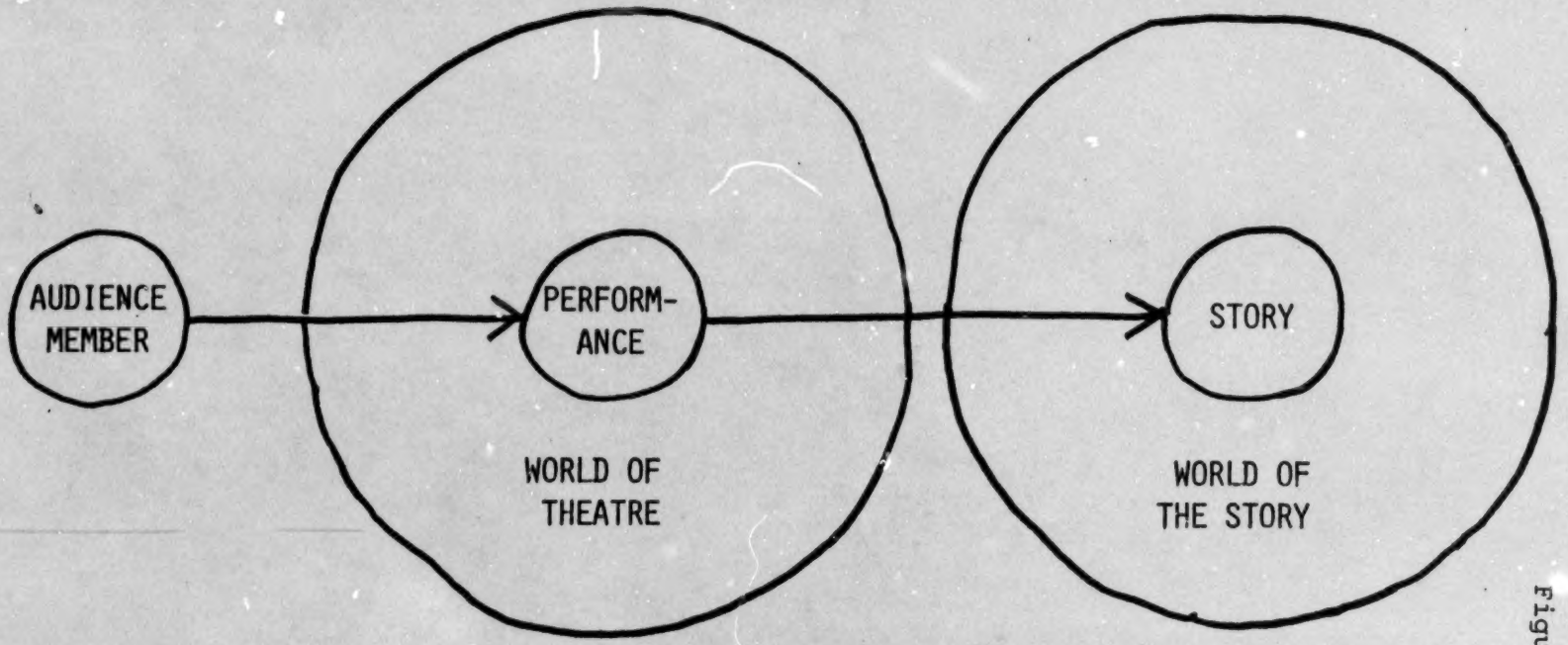
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Figure 5